

Keynote Speech to the Annual Meeting of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO
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Librarian of Congress James H. Billington

Almost two years ago, at the first meeting of the reconstituted U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, I proposed the idea of a World Digital Library, which I suggested the Library of Congress and other interested American institutions might pursue in the UNESCO context. I am here today to report on the progress we have made in starting to transform this idea into reality, and to ask for your support and involvement as we move forward.

In my June 2005 speech, I suggested that “the time may be right for our country's delegation to consider introducing to the world body a proposal for the cooperative building of a World Digital Library. This would be a new type of activity that could give UNESCO a fresh start and provide win-win opportunities for everybody. It would hold out the promise of bringing people closer together precisely by celebrating the depth and uniqueness of different cultures in a single global undertaking.”

The response to this proposal has been overwhelmingly positive. UNESCO was enthusiastic, and the Library of Congress and UNESCO have begun to forge a close working relationship in planning for the World Digital Library.

The U.S. National Commission has been supportive, as has been Ambassador Oliver and her staff at the U.S. Mission to UNESCO.

Together, the Library of Congress, the U.S. National Commission, the U.S. Mission, and UNESCO organized an experts’ meeting in Paris last December that helped build support for the project. Susanna Connaughton and Bob Martin participated in that meeting, and we appreciate their

involvement.

Let me say a few words about where we stand.

Digital library projects are expensive, and funding is crucial. In response to a request from us to fund the World Digital Library, Google, Inc. agreed to provide an initial \$3 million to fund the planning phase of the project.

We now are developing this plan, which will be completed by September 2008. Although the plan is being funded by Google, it will be made publicly available. It is being supported by IFLA and UNESCO, and will contain advice on capacity building for all libraries and cultural institutions, whether or not they choose to participate in the World Digital Library.

We are interpreting “plan” in a broad sense. In addition to developing the plan itself, we are engaged in a number of pilot and prototype projects with partners. We need to learn by doing, as well as to show some preliminary results early on.

Building the World Digital Library has two major aspects: acquiring the digital content; and creating a high-technology, multilingual website capable of attracting users, especially younger users whose impressions of the Internet are formed by Google, MySpace, YouTube, and other innovative commercial web sites.

With regard to content acquisition: a lot of material has been digitized in North America, Europe, and parts of East Asia, but much of the world lags in this area. The World Digital Library intends to work to overcome the digital content divide by helping libraries and other cultural institutions in the developing and especially the non-Western world digitize their collections.

Building upon our successful experience in the early 2000s in providing three sets of scanners to partners in Russia, the Library of Congress has provided scanning equipment and

training to the National Library of Brazil and the National Library of Egypt. These institutions now are digitizing rare maps and manuscripts for inclusion in the World Digital Library.

This is a good example of our conference theme in practice: “UNESCO as Capacity Builder: Pursuing its Mandate through Education, the Sciences, Culture, and Communication.”

A lot more can be done in this area. We hope to set up additional scanning centers in other parts of the world as the project goes forward.

At the December conference at UNESCO, we presented a mockup of the site and a short video that represented a visualization on the part of some of our young staff of what a World Digital Library should look like and the capabilities and features it should offer.

Based on the success of the mockup, we agreed with UNESCO to develop a working prototype, which will be unveiled at the UNESCO General Conference in Paris on October 17. The site will be multilingual, and feature search and display in seven languages: the six official UN languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish) plus Portuguese.

Five partners – the two national libraries of Russia, two libraries in Egypt, and the National Library of Brazil – plus the Library of Congress will supply the content for the prototype. There will be a functioning mirror site at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina is also helping with Arabic search and display and other technical tasks.

Once the prototype is launched, we expect to move very quickly to broaden the project: to increase both the number of partners involved and to expand the volume and range of content available on the site.

We urge you, as individual commissioners and as representatives of important American cultural institutions, to get involved in the project.

The Library of Congress should not and will not be the only U.S. partner. Other major American libraries, including federal libraries and archives, have important collections of interest to the world.

You also have international contacts and access to technologies that we would love to tap into. This should be a broad American initiative in UNESCO, and not just a project led by the Library of Congress.

Specifically, there are four ways in which other members of the U.S. National Commission and the institutions they represent can support the World Digital Library.

First, by contributing collections to the World Digital Library. Federal cultural institutions alone have vast collections that could be part of the World Digital Library. Examples that come to mind include the African and Asian materials in the Smithsonian (the Freer and the Sackler), materials about the Panama Canal in the National Archives that would complement the collections about the Suez Canal that the National Library of Egypt intends to digitize, and the photographic and print collections dealing with all cultures in the National Gallery. University and other research libraries of course have additional collections of all kinds.

Second, by participating in the project in a way that underlines its pluralism and diversity. We want the World Digital Library to follow a pluralistic model, in which libraries and other cultural institutions participate as institutions. We do not want a one country-one partner model. To set the right example, we want to have a real pluralism of representation on the U.S. side, with governmental and non-governmental, national, state, and local institutions all participating.

Third, we can look for synergies in our cooperation with foreign partners. The Institute for Museum and Library Services, the National Science Foundation, and other federal and non-federal

institutions all have programs involving cooperation with foreign partners. There should be ways in which we can combine efforts and co-sponsor meetings and other activities to advance the WDL. Some cooperation already has occurred along these lines, but we could do more.

Fourth, we can share skills and technology. Our technical people are interested in exchanging information, tools, and best practices about how to overcome the many technical challenges involved in this project. We are already getting some advice from universities and high technology firms, but there is a lot of technical expertise in the federal government and in the other institutions represented by the members of the U.S. National Commission.

My staff and I look forward to discussing with you and with Susanna how the U.S. National Commission and you as members can contribute in any of these areas and stay involved in the project.

I am happy to take your questions, but before I do, we would like to show the video that we prepared for the Paris meeting, and which gives a flavor of the international look and feel that we will be striving for in the World Digital Library prototype and in the full-scale project as it goes forward.